

Worship on Alpha – A Practical Guide

by Robin Dhillon

(Some material adapted from: "The Alpha Worship Manual", HTB Publications.)

Why is worship a part of the Alpha course?

Alpha is a basic introduction to the Christian faith. No introduction would be complete without including teaching about worship – including some practical considerations. The teaching tapes do not cover the topic directly, such as through a “What is Worship” video. Instead, a modeling, rather than a teaching approach is used. This means that while most topics are covered once during the course, worship is taught (modeled) and reinforced many times. The result is that by the end of the Alpha course, the participants have learned to become worshippers, of the Living God, not just spectators at an event.

While a thorough treatment of worship would involve teaching that all aspects of our lives (our every breath) should be given as an act of worship, we are restricting ourselves here to that aspect of worship that involves music and singing – usually as part of a corporate worship service. Throughout the course, guests participate by singing along with the worship leader, gaining an understanding of what worship is and why we worship, and ultimately, worshipping from the depths of their hearts, after having put their trust in Jesus Christ.

The act of worship should flow from offering ourselves completely to Him (Romans 12:1). We worship because we are commanded to do so by God, since He alone is worthy to be praised. We worship because we delight in His presence, and we can experience that presence during worship (Ps 145:18, 2 Chr 5:13-14). Worship can also reach into people’s hearts and through it, may encounter and come to believe and trust in God (Acts 16:25-30, Ps 40:3).

The Alpha Experience of Worship

At the start of an Alpha course, many guests find worship to be the most difficult part. While music permeates our culture, the public singing of songs is no longer as commonplace as in times past. For this reason, it would be unreasonable to expect uninhibited praise to occur on the first night. Also, many guests will not be believers, so the language and the truths expressed in the songs will be foreign to them.

By the end of the course, people have learned and experienced what it is like to worship God. It is then that worship becomes one of the most appreciated parts of Alpha. As people become more familiar with the songs, they will also find it easier to enter into worship – both on Alpha and within a church setting.

Practicalities – How to do worship on Alpha

Even if you have a very good understanding of the nature of worship, and how it should function during a service, it is important to remember that Alpha is first and foremost, a ministry to the guest. It is primarily for those seeking, not for the leaders or helpers.

The following ideas on what to do at each week are based on my experience with leading worship at several Alpha courses. It is important to assess the needs of the guests prior to committing to a particular approach. Also let the Holy Spirit guide you. What works for one course may not work for another.

Weeks 1 and 2

For the first two weeks, only do a couple of songs which last for about five minutes. At this stage, the idea is to allow the guest time to get used to singing. Don’t use songs which are of the “intimate worship” variety. Use songs which are God-centered, and which cause us to think about Him, but do not require a relationship with God to be sung. “I love You, Lord” would be too intimate a song at this time.

Now (and on all weeks), do not spend long talking about the songs. It is good to briefly explain the reason why we worship (singing is normal part of the Christian life ... it has been done throughout the ages ... etc). Also give people the freedom to worship (or not) anyway they want. Say it's ok to just sit and listen ... or to stand, whatever they are most comfortable with.

Weeks 3 and 4

By now, the guests have got used to the idea that we sing on Alpha. They probably still haven't come to faith in Jesus, but they are beginning to be comfortable with the idea of worship as being "something that Christians do". Continue as in weeks 1 and 2, and by week 4, maybe move up to about three songs. Still avoid the "intimate" songs.

Reinforce the reason why we sing, and give people the freedom to worship by singing or just listening.

Weeks 5 and 6

By now, we typically find that some people have dropped out of the course. Those that are left have either made a commitment to Jesus or are moving in that direction. At the very least, they are comfortable with the people, and a level of trust has developed. Now is the time to begin to introduce songs which express more of a personal relationship with God. Songs that address God are where we need to move to, because we need to be able to express our love for Him. Don't worry if some of the guests don't sing along. They may be observing to see how others interact with God.

At this time, we are also preparing people to come on the Holy Spirit weekend. Let people know that we will do lots of singing, and that there will probably be songs sung that we haven't learned yet. Very briefly, explain that one of the reasons we worship is that God asks us to do so, and that because we love Him, it is our heart's desire to praise and worship him. Also explain that worship is more than just singing. Try to keep any comments to about one minute in length.

The Weekend

We have found that for many, the Alpha Weekend is the time when people really begin to experience God in worship—and in fact, worship is for many their first experience of God. Psalm 22 says that God inhabits the praises of His people. As people worship, the Holy Spirit reveals the reality, majesty and love of God. The joy of being able to come into his presence (Psalm 100) becomes tangible and real.

There is a different dynamic on the weekend that there has been to this point. People are well connected relationally to their groups, and the excitement of being all together provides the opportunity to "let loose" in worship. Reuse most of the songs that you have used since the beginning, but add others as you feel led. There will probably be at least three times of extended worship where you need 5 or 6 songs. If you have been leading worship by yourself, see if you can round up a small band from the leaders of other groups who may be attending the retreat (this assumes that more than one Alpha course is doing the weekend together).

Don't be afraid to repeat songs in the various sets. Usually we find that one or two songs become "themes" for the weekend. The people really latch onto them. Flow with this and use the songs again and again. An interesting thing about this is that I have never had two Alpha courses where the same song became the theme song. This just goes to show that each group of people is different and that we need to be sensitive to their needs.

Don't be afraid to extend worship improvisationally on songs when so led. Explain as you go what you are doing, because people like to know what to do. Explain how singing to God is very much like praying to God and expressing our love to Him. Many times we have seen the Holy Spirit come and energise the worship. If you can sing spontaneously as prompted by the Lord, do so with sensitivity. If you can sing in the Spirit, check with your

leader as to when the best time to introduce this might be. Don't forget that some people will have probably received the gift of tongues, and it's a safe time to practice that gift. Above all, be sensitive to what the Lord is doing, and do not break any "flow" that is happening before the Lord is ready to move on.

Be prepared to have a set of quieter songs for use during ministry times. Be sure to coordinate with your leader, and take your cues from him or her as when to begin or stop singing.

Weeks 7 to 10

You are now into the "we want more" phase: More weekend, more worship, more everything. By now, people are anticipating the worship time – they can't wait for it to happen.

On the healing evening, you may also want some quieter sings, just like on the weekend. Coordinate with your leader.

Things to consider

- Initially, you may feel you are performing. Don't worry about it, just do it. You are leading worship in any case. People can worship by listening, and truth is being spoken.
- Be patient, and don't get discouraged. It may take until week 6 or even the weekend before worship develops.
- Don't do anything to alienate the newcomer. They are why we are here. Remember what it was like for us when we started. Brief instruction as described is essential to dispel fears, and to give people the freedom to move out in worship.
- Practice on the leaders and helpers. During the training sessions prior to Alpha, lead some worship, and use some of the songs that you plan to use during Alpha, especially those that they may not be familiar with. At least then you'll know that some people will be singing along with you.
- Instruct the leaders and helpers (if necessary) to tone down any natural exuberance in worship for the first few weeks, until people become comfortable with worshipping. Remember, this is a ministry to our guest, and we don't want to freak them out with weird behaviour (or at least what they might perceive as weird).
- Discuss with your leader the possibility of having a separate worship time on the weekend for just the leaders and helpers. We usually do this on the Saturday evening, after supper and before the free time. I usually use this as a time for spontaneous worship, and to teach people to sing in the Spirit. Lately, we have also used this as a time to soak in the presence of God, and be refreshed by Him.

The Worship Leader

It is important that your Alpha worship leader exhibit a number of characteristics.

- **A desire to worship God.** This is a worship leader's reason for living. This desire is infectious and can be caught by others.
- **A lifestyle of worship.** Worship is about our whole lives being oriented towards God. Our motivations and actions must match what we are singing about.
- **A servant heart.** The worship leader must be teachable and know that we serve as a team. A humble spirit is essential.

- **Musical ability.** It will be difficult to lead worship unless the leader has this.
 - Ideally able to play a lead instrument (e.g. piano or guitar) to a reasonable standard of expertise. We need to strive for excellence. We do not want to leave the guest with the impression that Christian worship is second rate musically to what is available in the world.
 - A strong singing voice, with good intonation, and an even and consistent rhythmic ability. If they can't lead, others can't follow.
 - Beware of someone who comes from a performance background and is untested in leading worship. I believe there is always a degree of ego present in musicians or singers. This must be tempered by humility and a desire to serve.
 - If there are a group of musicians, take the time to practice.
 - Detail oriented. Makes sure the projection system has the right songs, and that someone can operate it. Ensure everyone is in tune, etc.
 - Willingness to prepare. If the leader hasn't prepared, then people will know it and they will not be relaxed.
- **Musical attitude**
 - Try to keep your eyes open while singing – at least some of the time.
 - Smile and enjoy God
 - Worship leaders LEAD. Don't be influenced by people's favourite songs. You should be comfortable before God with the set list you have prepared.
 - Don't preach. Instructions and brief explanations (less than one minute in length) are sometimes essential to ensure the guest is comfortable with what is going on. But avoid going on at length about things. They are going to hear from Nicky. They don't need a sermon from you.

Song Suggestions

While this will depend to a large extent on the leader's preference and the leading of the Lord, it is a good idea to know where you can find good sources of music.

When planning the worship, remember that the intention is for guests to come into a relationship with God, not with our church culture. Therefore, we need to reach contemporary people with songs that resonate with the style of the culture. There is large body of contemporary praise and worship music that has emerged on the past few years, and excellent new stuff is being added daily.

Some popular publishers:

- Worship Together
- Vineyard music
- Integrity's Hosanna! Music

Some popular worship leaders

- Robin Mark
- Matt Redman
- Paul Oakley
- Tim Hughes